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SUBJECT: CHINA DONE BIDDING ITS TIME? PRC SCHOLARS WRESTLE
WITH CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY APPROACH

REF: A. BEIJING 607
[1](#)B. 08 BEIJING 3285
[1](#)C. 07 BEIJING 4133
[1](#)D. 07 BEIJING 925
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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) As China considers its broader role in addressing the global economic crisis and reflects with lingering pride on the 2008 Summer Olympics, it also grapples with the relevance and desirability of maintaining its traditional "low-key approach" to foreign policy matters and its oft-stated (and self-serving) principle of "non-interference" in other countries' affairs. Many Chinese scholars believe China can no longer follow the foreign policy dictum attributed to Deng Xiaoping of "hiding one's capacities and biding one's time," particularly as China seeks to deepen its relationship with the United States. In recent meetings with PolOffs, however, scholars expressed discomfort with the concept of a U.S.-China "G-2" that, to them, would imply exclusion of other major global players and would suggest a much larger sharing of the global leadership burden than China has heretofore been willing to bear. While still publicly espousing the policy of non-interference, China sees the United Nations Security Council (where it has a veto) as the channel for more interventionist actions in international affairs. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) In the annual Foreign Minister's press conference held on the margins of the National People's Congress, FM Yang Jiechi on March 7 presented the PRC's diplomatic plan for 2009, reaffirming that China's main priority was to ensure steady and rapid economic development in China, particularly in the face of the global economic crisis. Yang noted China's "visibly upgraded" international standing following the 2008 Summer Olympic Games and other prominent multilateral events such as the Asia-Europe Meeting in November (ref A). In a series of recent meetings with PolOffs, Chinese scholars, while acknowledging the primacy of domestic issues driving China's foreign policy, held differing views on what China's international profile should be and how much China should be guided by its traditional declared policy of non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs.

Foreign Policy Subservience to Domestic Policy

[1](#)3. (C) Tsinghua University scholar Chu Shulong (protect) argued to PolOff that the absence of foreign policy officials from the Politburo reflected the primacy of domestic concerns over foreign policy in top-level Chinese policy formulation. He noted that compared to the United States, China had no "strategic" vision in its foreign policy, and that China had no major global foreign policy objectives now that it had acceded to the WTO and hosted the Beijing Olympics. China Foreign Affairs University scholar Su Hao (protect) and Tsinghua University Center for U.S.-China Relations Director Sun Zhe (protect) separately disagreed, with both invoking

the Chinese expression "foreign policy concerns are not small matters" (wai shi wu xiao shi). Rebutting the idea that foreign policy was not well represented in Chinese leadership circles, Su stated that President Hu Jintao himself watched foreign policy matters closely, and Sun touted State Councilor Dai Bingguo (part of the Hu-led Central Leading Group on Foreign Affairs) as a "key coordinator" of foreign policy issues, saying "wherever President Hu goes, Dai follows."

"Hiding Capacities and Biding Time" Still Valid?

14. (C) Su Hao affirmed the continued applicability of the Chinese catch-phrase "hiding one's capacities and biding one's time" (tao guang yang hui, attributed to Deng Xiaoping) to China's low-key approach to diplomacy, saying that China would always be cautious in its foreign policy approach "based on its long history of accommodating stronger powers on its periphery." In addition, Su said, despite China's increased profile in the world, China's domestic needs would act as a constraint on China's international behavior.

15. (C) Renmin University International Relations scholar Shi Yinhong (protect) and Tsinghua University's Sun countered separately that U.S. and international expectations for China's role in the world made maintaining a "low-key" foreign policy approach impossible. Chinese leaders no longer referred to a "low-profile" diplomatic approach, Shi said, if only to avoid China being perceived as a "free

rider" in the international community. Sun commented that the United States was "pushing China" to take a more active international role. While agreeing on the great significance to China of hosting the Summer Olympics, Renmin University's Jin Canrong (protect) said that China currently had a number of major foreign policy objectives that reflected China's growing international stature, including overcoming the global economic crisis, maintaining positive momentum in the U.S.-China relationship and "stabilizing the neighborhood," including Pakistan and Afghanistan.

16. (C) Beijing University Associate Professor Yu Tiejun (protect) stated that no consensus existed on the continued relevance of "hiding one's capacities and biding one's time," though he noted that "the mainstream" still supported the concept. Yu highlighted the second phrase of Deng's dictum "(while) getting something accomplished" (you suo zuo wei), to suggest that even in its traditional formulation, China's foreign policy included an element of activism. Given China's increasing profile, Yu suggested, China's foreign policy concept might have to catch up to its on-the-ground implementation.

Importance of the United States: the "G-2" Trap?

17. (C) While scholars with whom we spoke emphasized the primary importance of U.S.-China relations, many expressed concern about the implications of the "G-2" concept. Shi suggested that many Chinese and EU scholars remained uncomfortable with the concept because it implicitly diminished the importance of other global actors. He added that some Chinese scholars had suggested that the "G-2" concept was a means for the United States to sow hostility toward China among other global actors. Beijing University Associate Professor Yu Wanli (protect), a frequent contributor to the People's Daily-owned paper for international news Huanqiu Shibao, criticized the "G-2" concept in a conversation with PolOff, saying the "G-2" was neither multipolar nor multilateral but rather "a way for the United States to manipulate China into participating in U.S. unilateralism." Shi separately speculated, however, that President Hu and Premier Wen, conscious of their image in the international community, might be attracted to the global leadership profile inherent in a "G-2" concept.

Principle of Non-Interference

¶8. (C) All scholars with whom we spoke agreed that Chinese foreign policy now less strictly adhered to China's oft-stated principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, one of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" first articulated by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1954 and incorporated into the Chinese Constitution in ¶1982. Noting the appointment of special envoys on different issues, Sun Zhe said the move away from a non-interference policy had been incremental and the degree of latitude for action varied according to the issue. He noted that Chinese diplomats now played a more active role in promoting Chinese business interests and protecting Chinese citizens abroad. On security issues, Sun highlighted China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations (ref B) and in international efforts to combat piracy off the Somali coast as evidence that China was pursuing a more active foreign policy. To avoid painting the anti-piracy operation as a dramatic change in PRC foreign policy, he noted that China's participation in the anti-piracy effort was not based on its own initiative but rather as a reaction to events and encouragement from other nations. Chu Shulong likewise cited China's participation in international disaster relief efforts as evidence of a modest move along "a scale from non-interference to global player."

¶9. (C) Beijing University's Yu Tiejun commented that China's move away from a non-interference policy was manifested in China's active role in Burma, Sudan, and in particular, Yu underscored, South Asia, where in the aftermath of the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack, China had sent Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei as a mediator to both Pakistan and India. Though fear of armed conflict between India and Pakistan had driven China's initiative, Yu said, the move was unprecedented for China, which traditionally would have allowed the feuding countries to settle their problems on their own. The concept of "non-interference" might need to be "redefined" to accommodate China's more active posture, he added.

¶10. (C) While acknowledging that PRC foreign policy had become more activist (and interventionist) in recent years, Beijing's focus nevertheless had remained restricted primarily to neighboring regions and countries on China's "near periphery," according to Kang Shaobang (protect), Professor and former Director of the Institute for International Strategic Studies at the Central Party School (CPS). To represent this new, but still limited activism, Kang told PolOffs he advocated adding the phrase "peaceful intervention" (heping ganyu) to China's two well-known foreign policy mantras of "peaceful rise" and "peaceful development." As represented by issues such as the Korean Peninsula, South China Sea and Afghanistan, PRC interests had dictated that it "must intervene" in those areas, but in a "positive and peaceful" way. Moreover, the PRC's rapid development over the last 30 years had finally given it the means to intervene effectively on those issues. Nevertheless, Kang asserted, China's enormous domestic challenges meant that it would lack the capability to -- and should not -- intervene consistently in more distant problems anytime soon. The "hiding one's capacities and biding one's time" mantra, overall, continued to serve China well, Kang concluded.

¶11. (C) Renmin University's Jin Canrong held a more jaded view; he commented to PolOff that China's commitment to the principle of non-interference had always been "situational." Beijing University Professor Yu Wanli made a similar point. He defended China's commitment to non-interference as "very strong" but acknowledged that China made exceptions to that commitment, even if only "very rarely" and under UN cover to demonstrate consensus international support for its actions. "That is why China is the number one provider of forces for UN missions," Yu said. (Note: Yu was referring to China's status as number one among P-5 countries in forces deployed in peacekeeping operations, a rank it loses from time to time when the French boost their contribution. Nigeria, Pakistan,

India and other non-P-5 countries contribute many times more troops than China does.)

¶12. (C) Renmin University's Shi Yinhong stressed that China had "not budged an inch" from its adherence to the principles of Article VII of the UN Charter (which affirms the central role of the Security Council in identifying and addressing threats to, and breaches of, peace and acts of aggression), in part, because China wished to avoid using its veto or abstaining in UN Security Council votes. Shi believed the number of UNSC-directed initiatives supported by China recently represented a "sea change" compared to China's position ten years earlier. Still, he admitted, compared to the more activist posture of the EU and United States, a "sea of differences" remained between Western and PRC approaches.

Comment

¶13. (C) Disagreement among scholars on China's optimal foreign policy direction reflects the contradictory pressures at play. On the one hand, China -- despite its economic success of the last three decades -- continues to face enormous domestic economic and social challenges and is reluctant to take on burdensome international responsibilities. In addition, Chinese leaders may recognize that greater activism on the international stage likely will invite increased domestic and foreign criticism of China's own faults, perhaps even risking further pressure for international "intervention" in "purely internal" Chinese matters such as the simmering ethnic tensions in PRC provinces like Tibet and Xinjiang. On the other hand, China's increasingly widespread and global interests demand a more activist Chinese foreign policy, while its growing economic might and political influence abroad result in increasing calls internationally that Beijing use its powers responsibly. Until these contradictory impulses are reconciled, China's actions on the global stage will continue to be circumscribed by the leadership's pursuit of China's narrow self-interests.

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